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ABSTRACT

Student difficulties adjusting to college may lead to individual dysfunction. The enhancement of a sense of community could have a positive effect on student morale and may help to prevent dysfunction. This study examined the effects of a group counseling program on college students' sense of community. College students (N=90), mostly freshmen, completed the Frame of Reference Measure of a Sense of Community scale (FRSC) as a pretest and a posttest. Some subjects (N=49) participated in small group counseling sessions weekly for 10 weeks, focusing on personal growth, communication skills, family relationships, self-esteem, and spiritual growth. Analysis of total FRSC scores following completion of the program revealed a significant difference in scores of group participants and nonparticipants (N=41): the nonparticipants' psychological sense of community decreased while the participants' scores increased. Results also revealed significant differences between the two groups in scores on two frame of reference scales: from pretest to posttest, participants showed a significant increase in scores when frames of reference were dormitory life and college in general, while scores of nonparticipants showed no significant change in the area of dormitory life and decreased significantly when the frame of reference was the college in general. These findings suggest that group counseling can enhance a psychological sense of community, and thereby alleviate alienation, foster social integration, and potentially prevent individual dysfunction. (NB)

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Enhancing a Psychological Sense of Community on a College Campus Through Participation in Group Counseling

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Enhancing a Psychological Sense of Community on a College Campus Through Participation in Group Counseling

The college campus, while often the site of psychological research, is not often the actual target of intervention by community psychologists. Community psychology has more typically focused on neighborhoods, organizations, and informal networks in applied research. Yet the college campus is a community which is ripe for intervention. Because of the diversity of students' backgrounds, the diversity of goals, and the often abrupt change from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar and much more complex and demanding one, many students have difficulty adjusting to the college environment (Astin, 1984; Baker & Siryk, 1983; Kramer & Washburn, 1983; Nelson, Scott & Bryan, 1984).

These adjustment difficulties encountered by students often lead to a sense of alienation from the college environment, and this in turn may result in individual dysfunction (Pascarella, 1985; Simpson, Baker, & Mellinger, 1980). Additionally, high levels of maladjustment and alienation are thought to be major factors in low retention rates, particularly among Freshmen (Astin, 1984; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984; Simpson, Baker, & Mellinger, 1980). In an attempt to smooth the transition or enhance adjustment to the new community, many colleges provide assistance through their counseling services. While the type of assistance varies, it is commonly at the individual level, through personal counseling, or else at the large-group level, through "orientation" programs. Yet many times a counseling center's resources are limited to the point of being inadequate, and are not able to accommodate all of the target population (Kemerer, Baldridge, & Green, 1982; Stratil, 1984). Rather than approaching this problem from an individual perspective or even

a treatment perspective, is it not more appropriate to approach it from a community-preventive perspective?

A psychological sense of community has long been hypothesized as not only an important indicator of community functioning (Sarason, 1974), but also as being of preventive value on the individual level, as well as on the community level (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). Broadly defined as an individual's perception of belonging to and being accepted by an accessible, mutually supportive social network (Compas, 1981; Sarason, 1974), a psychological sense of community may benefit students in a number of ways. The sense of community is not only intrinsically gratifying, becoming part of an individual's self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979), but it also is hypothesized to foster psychological well-being and to mediate potentially stressful events (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). If indeed a psychological sense of community serves these functions, then the enhancement of a sense of community on a college campus should have a positive effect on student morale and potentially serve as a prophylactic for individual dysfunction.

Previous research indicates that active involvement in organizations is associated with increased levels of a psychological sense of community (Schreiner, 1982). Therefore, the potential to enhance a psychological sense of community may exist in fostering participation in organizations. Additionally, the value of student interaction, both with faculty and with each other, and the positive effects of small group settings for increasing retention are well documented (Astin, 1984; Kramer & Washburn, 1983; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984; Pappas, 1967). Applied to a college setting, it may be possible to enhance students' sense of community by encouraging Freshmen to join clubs, fraternities or sororities, or other voluntary organizations, thereby potentially increasing retention. However, for experimentation purposes, groups were created for the specific purpose of

testing the validity of their use as a tool for increasing students' psychological sense of community. The hypothesis was that students who participated in a group counseling program for ten weeks would score significantly higher on a measure of a psychological sense of community than would those students who had not participated in the program.

Method

Subjects

Ninety subjects, 77% of whom were Freshmen, participated in this study. The subjects were students in a Social Psychology class at a small, private, church-related four-year college located in the rural southeast. Thirty-seven percent of the subjects were male; sixty-three percent were female. All subjects completed a measure of a psychological sense of community as a pretest and then were given the opportunity to participate in a group counseling program for extra credit in the course. Forty-nine elected to participate in the program; forty-one chose not to participate. The mean pretest scores and variances of the two groups were compared, and no significant differences were found; thus equivalence of the two groups was assumed. The 49 group participants were then randomly assigned into groups of seven for the duration of the program.

Materials

All subjects were administered the Frame of Reference Measure of a Sense of Community scale (hereafter labeled FRSC) as a pretest and posttest. The FRSC, developed by Schreiner (1982) to assess a psychological sense of community across various frames of reference, consists of 50 items with a 5-point Likert scale response. There are ten items for each of five frames of reference: city, neighborhood, work, family, and voluntary organization. For the purposes of this study, the neighborhood frame of reference referred to the dorm, and the work frame of reference referred to the college in general. The FRSC is a highly

reliable scale (coefficient alpha = .94), with adequate construct validity thus far, as established through factor analysis and discriminant analyses, and adequate concurrent validity with subjects' self-reported feelings of belonging to their community (Schreiner, 1982; Schreiner, 1986).

Procedure

After administration of the FRSC pretest to all subjects and the subsequent election to participate in the group counseling program, the 49 subjects in the experimental condition were randomly assigned to groups. The groups consisted of no more than seven students, with group leaders being upper-level Psychology majors who were trained together for the purposes of this study. Group leaders met once weekly to ensure consistency in technique; all groups utilized the same activities and materials, and were organized around the same format. Group sessions focused on personal growth, communication skills, family relationships, self-esteem, and spiritual growth, due to the religious affiliation of the college. Groups met once a week for ten weeks, with sessions lasting approximately two hours. Upon completion of the ten-week program, all subjects were again administered the FRSC and group participants' and non-participants' scores were compared.

Results

An analysis of variance computed on total FRSC scores after completion of the program revealed a significant difference in the scores of participants and non-participants ($p < .05$; see Table 1). The non-participants' psychological sense of community scores actually decreased an average of 3.3 points, while the group participants' sense of community scores increased an average of 5.6 points.

Further analyses of the subscores of the FRSC revealed that there were significant differences in scores on two of the frame of reference scales, as well. A t-test computed on the pretest/posttest change scores of group

participants showed a significant increase in participants' scores when the frames of reference utilized were dorm life ($t(48) = 2.8$; $p < .05$) and the college in general ($t(48) = 2.08$; $p < .05$), while the scores of non-participants showed no significant change in the area of dorm life and actually decreased significantly when the frame of reference was the college in general ($t(40) = 2.44$; $p < .05$). An analysis of variance comparison of participants' and non-participants' total posttest scores revealed a significant difference as well when the college was the frame of reference ($F(1,88) = 8.17$; $p < .01$).

Discussion

Based on the significant increases in scores among group participants on the measure of a psychological sense of community, it appears that the experience of group counseling may serve to enhance a psychological sense of community. As noted by many authors in the student retention literature, poor social integration and non-involvement in campus activities are key factors in student attrition, particularly at the Freshman level (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Small group settings appear to hold great promise for easing students' transition into college, even though those settings may be artifically created (Knott & Daher, 1978; Pappas, 1967).

There are several reasons why small group experiences may be significantly related to an increased sense of community. An outline of the components of a psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Schreiner, 1982; Schreiner, 1986) reveals a distinct parallel between the key features of the group counseling program and the very experiences which enhance and maintain a psychological sense of community.

The first component of a psychological sense of community is a sense of belonging (Schreiner, 1982) or membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Several factors serve to enhance one's sense of membership and belonging, such as boundaries, emotional safety, identification with the group, personal investment, and a common symbol system. In the specific case of the group counseling experience, the sense of membership and belonging was fostered in these areas through the structured meeting times, closed membership, the emphasis on confidentiality, the commitment to participate for ten weeks, the investment of time and personal energy, the act of self-disclosure, and the fact that the booklets, activities, and terminology would not automatically be understood by persons outside the group. These factors combined to produce an environment in which students felt accepted, protected, and connected.

The second component of a psychological sense of community is mutual support (Schreiner, 1986) or influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This component not only refers to being impacted by the group, but also to a sense of having an impact on the group. As Trotzer (1977) notes, "groups help individuals create their personal identity and individuals influence the traits that groups exemplify" (p. 14). The social support received from group members acts as a buffer for the larger community. Specifically, the support received from fellow students in the group mediates the stressors of the campus. Knowing there were other students who were experiencing difficulties adjusting to college life, and being able to share these emotions appeared to enable students to cope more successfully and to see their college experiences in a more positive light.

The third component of a psychological sense of community has been identified as a functional interdependence (Schreiner, 1986), or integration and need fulfillment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Not only must the interdependence be functional, but it must also be an acknowledged interdependence. An expressed sense of obligation and responsibility to other group members enhances one's sense of community. Giving or doing for

others what one expects to receive from them maintains this interdependence and creates a strong, cohesive community with which one can readily identify and for which one can feel a sense of belonging and being needed. The group experience provides not only the opportunity to be helped, but also the opportunity to offer help to others (Trotzer, 1977). The experience of group success and the sense of interpersonal competence that occurs from interaction in the group provide powerful reinforcement and need fulfillment. In many ways, the group is a microcosm of the larger community, and thus one's success within the group may generalize to other campus settings. It is this concept of the group providing a setting for "reality testing", or being a "social laboratory" (Trotzer, 1977, p. 15) that is the thrust of functional interdependence, integration, and need fulfillment.

The final component of a psychological sense of community which is experienced within the small group setting is a shared perspective (Schreiner, 1986) or shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Group members found that they had many interests, values, and beliefs in common. The positive interactions with group members appeared to result in a common perspective as a result of what was shared in the counseling program. A sense of group cohesion develops when members work toward fulfillment of common goals, and one is more likely to feel a part of a community whose perspectives, values, and beliefs are similar to his or hers (Gusfield, 1975; Heller & Monahan, 1977; Schreiner, 1986). Thus students felt more integrated into campus life in general because they were able to discover how similar they were to other students and were able to experience positive interactions with those students.

The potential impact of such a program cannot be overemphasized. It appears that it is possible to enhance a psychological sense of community through group counseling, and thereby alleviate alienation, foster social

integration, and potentially prevent individual dysfunction. It is particularly noteworthy that the frames of reference most significantly affected by the group experiences were dorm life and the college context in general. Thus, enhancing a sense of community among college students may have positive effects on student satisfaction and morale, and may be a more efficient and effective means of preventing individual dysfunction and increasing retention on college campuses.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Comparison of Total FRSC Scores Between Group Participants and Non-Participants

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between Groups	1	1458.818	1458.818	4.41*
Within Groups	88	29122.17	330.934	
Total	89	30580.99		

*$p < .05$

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